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THE UTILITY and IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN LEARNING, STATED IN A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE

PARISH-CHURCH of ASHFORD, in KENT.

On WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 14, 1782,

AT THE

ANNIVERSARY MEETING of the GENTLEMEN educated at that School.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

PROVERBS xix chap. Part of Verſe 2.

——That the ſoul be without knowledge it is not good.——

IT is obſervable, that man is ſent into the world, totally ignorant and uninformed; he is furniſhed with a capacity for attaining knowledge, but the acquiſition of it depends on his own exertions. There is this remarkable difference, between the eye of the body, and that of the mind; the one is compleatly finiſhed by the hand of Nature, the other is left to be improved by artificial cultivation. And in proportion as a man cultivates, or neglects his faculties, he becomes a reſpectable, or a contemptible being;

he exalts or degrades himſelf in the ſcale of exiſtence. "A man without underſtanding," in the Pſalmiſt's eſtimation, "may be compared unto the beaſts that periſh;" *Pſalm* xlix. 20. and the compariſon muſt end in his utter diſgrace. For *they* are invariably directed by natural impulſe, and act in conformity to their Makers will; whereas *man*, who remains in a ſtate of voluntary ignorance, counteracts the intentions of Providence; who deſigned that he ſhould be "wiſer than the beaſts of the earth, and the fowls of Heaven." *Job* xxxv. 11. So true, is the obſervation in the text, "that the Soul be without knowledge it is not good." In which propoſition, much more is implied than expreſſed; for it undoubtedly means, that it is ſo far from being good, as to be a real and deplorable evil.

KNOWLEDGE may be conſidered in a double reſpect, as it relates either to ſpiritual, or to ſecular objects; the

the abſolute neceſſity of the former is obvious at firſt view, and requires no illuſtration: I propoſe therefore to confine myſelf to the latter, to conſider the utility and importance of *human learning*, to Civil Society, and to True Religion.—It's advantages to individuals, are a field, which has been pre-occupied, on this occaſion.

First, I ſhall conſider the utility and importance of human learning, to Civil Society.

If we look abroad into the world, and take an extenſive view of the various tribes of the human race, they will afford a moſt intereſting ſpectacle to a contemplative mind. We ſhall find ſome in poſſeſſion of all the comforts, the conveniences, and the elegancies of life; whilſt in others, we ſhall hardly diſcover the leaſt traces of humanity, as they ſeem only to differ in exterior ſhape, from the flocks and the herds, with which they aſſociate.—Now, this diverſity of character,

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is not to be aſcribed to any *natural* ſuperiority, which the civilized European may be thought to poſſeſs, above the African or the American ſavage. For reaſon itſelf ſuggeſts, and revelation aſſures us, that "God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth." *Acts* xvii. 26. If however, we ſhould ſtill be diſpoſed to indulge a fond complacency of mind, and be tempted to "think more highly of ourſelves, than we ought to think;" *Rom.* xii. 3. let us look back into the annals of this country, and from the picture therein delineated of the manners of our anceſtors, *we* ſhall find little cauſe to boaſt of any original pre-eminence.

It is only then by means of that culture and application, of which man is naturally ſuſceptible, that his faculties are expanded, and his capacity enlarged. It is by this exerciſe of his underſtanding, that he is enabled to contemplate the ſtupendous ſyſtem of the material

material world; to inveſtigate the outlines of moral duty; to unfold the receſſes of the human heart; and to frame laws, and political inſtitutions, for the purpoſes of civil government.—Hence too are derived thoſe ſubordinate arts and ornamental improvements, which render mankind gentle and humane, and contribute to the ſplendour and perfection of ſociety.—And indeed, of ſo great importance, have theſe arts been ever held in the eſtimation of mankind, that the Gentiles, enrolled the inventors of them amongſt their gods, and inſtituted divine honours to their memory.

I am aware it may be objected, that, notwithſtanding this excellence of literature and ſcience, they have occaſionally exerted their influence, to the diſadvantage of mankind. It may be ſaid, that the exceſſive refinements and embelliſhments of art, have opened a door to diſſipation and luxury, and have

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been inſtrumental in producing a depravity of morals.—It may be ſaid, that there have been men of learning, who have reaſoned themſelves and others out of every principle of common ſenſe; who have obſcured ſelf-evident truths by verbal ambiguity; and have perplexed their underſtandings, in the intricate mazes of metaphyſical diſtinctions.—That human learning, as well as every other valuable attainment, may *caſually* be attended with inconvenience, is a poſition which I have little inclination to controvert. In every ſublunary advantage, there is an allay of imperfection. Even the moſt ſalutary bleſſings may, by an injudicious application, be eventually productive of miſchievous effects.—Liberty, for inſtance, may degenerate into licentiouſneſs, and fill the world with anarchy and confuſion; yet it is preſumed, no one in his ſenſes will have the confidence to aſſert, that Liberty is not a real and ſubſtantial bleſſing.—It will be admitted

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then, that learning may be *accidentally* perverted; nevertheleſs in its *natural tendency*, it is admirably calculated to ſupport, to improve, and to adorn ſociety, and without it life itſelf could be eſteemed but an inſipid poſſeſſion.

SECONDLY. I ſhall conſider its utility and importance to True Religion.

IT is indeed a moſt pleaſing reflection, that the cultivation and improvement of knowledge in its ſeveral branches, which have been ſo ſucceſsfully purſued in the laſt and preſent century, have been evidently productive of the moſt eſſential advantage to the intereſts of Revelation. It may not be improper to ſtate a few particular inſtances.

I SHALL firſt obſerve, that a ſtudious contemplation of the works of nature, has firmly and immoveably eſtabliſhed

eſtabliſhed the fundamental principles of *all* religion. —The exiſtence and perfections of the Deity; his infinite wiſdom, almighty power, and ſupreme goodneſs, have been demonſtrably aſcertained, from the fabric of the univerſe in general, as well as from the arrangement of its conſtituent parts. Hence, all the ſchemes of atheiſtical invention, have been triumphantly expoſed, and entirely ſubverted.——And, as we here meet with the moſt conſummate proofs, of the firſt and leading principles of religion, ſo every ſtep we advance in natural inquiries, evinces the weakneſs and futility of all thoſe objections which are urged againſt Revelation, from the *myſteries* it contains. The truth is, the whole oeconomy of nature abounds with myſteries. Even the moſt common, and familiar objects, (though we can eaſily diſcern, that they are adapted to the wiſeſt purpoſes,) are above our comprehenſion; nor are we able to explain, or to inveſtigate

gate the mode of their exiſtence. The formation of the meaneſt inſect, the growth of a ſpire of graſs, are myſteries to the acuteſt underſtanding.—If then, real difficulties occur in contemplating the loweſt productions of the Creator's hands; how can we expect to find out "the Almighty himſelf to perfection!" *Job* xi. 7. how can we wonder if "His judgments are unſearchable, and his ways paſt finding out!"* *Rom.* xi, 33.

But to proceed.—They who have carried their reſearches into the interior parts of the *terraqueous globe*, have returned with information, extremely favourable to the cauſe of true religion, ſo far as it is intereſted in the account of the Univerſal Deluge, recorded in the

* It is the obſervation of an ingenious writer, that "ſome remarkable diſcoveries in natural philoſophy, ſeem providentially reſerved for the humiliation of an inſolent and unbelieving age; exhibiting to their eyes, *much ſtranger and more* amazing myſteries in the ſeveral experiments and examples of *electricity*, and the *polypus*, than any articles of belief in the chriſtian faith."

Bible.—The ſacred oracles inform us, that " the waters prevailed above the higheſt mountains;" *Gen.* vii. 19. the higheſt mountains have been appealed to, to decide this important queſtion. And what has been the reſult of this appeal? they all unitedly concur, in exhibiting the ſpoils depoſited on their heights on that awful occaſion. The remains of vegetable and animal productions in great variety and abundance, have been found in climates, in which they never *naturally* exiſted. Theſe are phenomena, which abſolutely demonſtrate the Moſaic account to be inconteſtably true, and are utterly inexplicable upon every other ſuppoſition.*

This obſervation may be extended further. The ſtudy of the antient languages, which deſervedly con-

* See Revelation examined with candour, vol. i. Page 189.

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ſtitutes the baſis of a truly liberal education, has been ſubſervient to the ſame important end. A profound ſkill in philological erudition; an accurate knowledge of the cuſtoms and manners of antiquity; an intimate acquaintance with the phraſe and idiom peculiar to the languages, in which the ſcriptures were originally delivered, have often thrown an unexpected light upon obſcure paſſages in Holy Writ.

Hence ſpecious objections have been removed, and apparent contradictions reconciled; from which a preſumption naturally ariſes, that *all* the cavils of infidelity are founded in *ignorance*, and would entirely be precluded, were the ſacred writings perfectly underſtood.

The laſt obſervation I ſhall make, is, that the knowledge of Profane Hiſtory, has likewiſe afforded a collateral ſupport, to the truths of revelation. The accounts of ancient times therein preſerved, though manifeſtly

nifeſtly corrupted, yet in many of their principal and diſtinguiſhed outlines, remarkably coincide with the ſacred annals, and confirm their title to the higheſt credibility.—Hence teſtimonies have been produced of various events recorded in the ſcriptures;* theſe teſtimonies have been extracted from writers of the moſt unexceptionable deſcription; who were ſo far from being attached by any fond partiality, either to the civil or religious intereſts of the Jews, that many of them were the avowed and inveterate enemies of both. Theſe are truths, which when ſeparately and independently conſidered, cannot fail to leave an impreſſion on every inquiſitive and thoughtful mind. But when they are united with the *direct proofs* of the divine origin of the Goſpel, which men of learning have exhibited to the world: with proofs drawn from its *interior* characters, the conſummate excellency of its

* Vide Grotius de veritate Rel. Chriſt. Lib. i. Sect. 16.

precepts,

precepts, and the tranſcendent dignity of its doctrines; with proofs deduced from its *external* credentials, from miracles indiſputably performed, and prophecies unqueſtionably fulfilled:——when, I ſay, all theſe ſcattered rays are collected and drawn to one central point; they form ſuch a blaze of accumulated evidence, as is not to be reſiſted, unleſs the intellectual eye be vitiated by prejudice, or blinded by perverſeneſs.

In ſhort, there is a genuine alliance, a native connection between ſound learning and true religion; they are both derived from the ſame fountain and *Father of lights*: hence we are not to wonder, if thoſe who have been moſt eminent for their proficiency in knowledge, have been equally diſtinguiſhed by their attachment to Revelation. The incomparable Newton, the profound Bacon, the ſagacious Locke, and a long liſt of others, whoſe names are an ornament to human nature, as well as an honour to this country, have all

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ranked under the ſtandard of chriſtianity, and conſecrated their labours to its ſervice.—And let not the friend to revelation be alarmed, if ſome who have been dignified with the appellation of philoſophers, have proſtituted their talents in the defence and ſupport of *irreligion*. For I preſume, we ſhall hardly compare the manly argument, and the ſolid reaſoning of a Locke, with the inconſiſtent declamation of a Bolingbroke;* or the rational philoſophy of a Newton and a Boyle, with the petulant ſophiſtry of a Hume† or a Voltaire.

But further, As Human Learning thus forms an

* The groſs and palpable inconſiſtencies, which ſo frequently occur in Lord Bolingbroke's works, are clearly pointed out in *Leland's view of the deiſtical writers.*

† For a thorough confutation of Mr. Hume's principles, ſee *Dr. Beattie's eſſay on the nature and immutability of truth.*

inſuperable barrier againſt *infidelity* on the one hand, it no leſs operates as an effectual preſervative againſt *ſuperſtition* on the other. Superſtition, is a "peſtilence that walketh in darkneſs; *Pſalm* xci. 6. but it ſhuns the approach of the light of knowledge; as the monſters of the deſert when the ſun ariſeth, retire to their dens. It was in conſequence of that inundation of ignorance and barbariſm, which followed the diſſolution of the Roman Empire, that the ſuperſtitions and corruptions of *Popery*, aroſe to ſo enormous a height and with ſo malignant an influence on the moſt important intereſts of mankind.---It was then, men were taught to relinquiſh the comforts of ſociety, for the gloomy ſolitude of a cloiſter; to inflict on themſelves the moſt unnatural ſeverities; to ſubmit to the moſt excruciating diſcipline; and for what? In order to conciliate *his* affection and eſteem, who had himſelf

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declared, that " his yoke was eaſy, and his burden light." *Matt.* xi. 30.---It was then, men were taught to disbelieve their ſenſes, to renounce their underſtandings, to adopt with implicit reverence and credulity, the dreams of ignorant enthuſiaſts and the artifices of deſigning impoſtors. It was when *men were aſleep*, that theſe *tares were ſown*; and in this deplorable darkneſs was the whole chriſtian world involved, till the auſpicious æra of the Reformation: when (with the Divine Bleſſing) the revival of letters, and the dawn of ſcience began to diſperſe the gloom, and to reſtore mankind, (except thoſe who were willing to be enſlaved) to their liberty and their ſenſes ---But ſhould ever the lamp of ſcience be again extinguiſhed, there would be an end to Liberty, Civil and Religious; an end to every bleſſing and every comfort of human life; the ſame cloud of ignorance would inevitably return, the

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ſame ſuperſtitions and abominable corruptions as infallibly attend it.

FROM this imperfect ſketch we may in ſome degree eſtimate the utility and importance of human learning. The only queſtion now to be determined is, at what period of life this valuable acquiſition may be beſt ſecured. And the anſwer is extremely obvious, it can be no other than the *morning of life*, when the powers of the mind are vigorous and active. It is the voice of wiſdom herſelf, "they that ſeek me early ſhall find me;" *Prov.* viii. 17. which manifeſtly implies, that a late application will hardly be attended with ſucceſs. If the proper ſeed-time be neglected, the harveſt muſt be ſcanty in proportion. This is a truth which particularly demands the attention of the *riſing generation*, to whom I ſhall beg leave to addreſs the remainder of this diſcourſe.——It extremely then imports you to reflect, that you are not ſent into the world merely to

take your *paſtime therein*; but for the higher and more noble purpoſe of cultivating your underſtandings, and regulating your affections. You have now an opportunity to adorn your minds, with uſeful and elegant furniture; and you are bound by every tie to improve the opportunity. It is a duty which you owe to yourſelves, to your parents, to your country.—Let me remind you too that on *your* exertions, and on *your* improvement, the reputation of this ſeminary entirely depends. The torch of learning is committed to *your* hands; it is *your* part to preſerve the generous flame, and to tranſmit it with undiminiſhed luſtre to thoſe that come after you. And let not any apparent or real difficulties, abate the ardour of your application. The prize of learning (it is true) is fixed on an eminence, and it may coſt you ſome painful ſteps to reach its ſummit, for (ſuch is the will of Providence,) nothing worth poſſeſſing is to be obtained without difficulty.

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We are not to expect to find gold on the ſurface of the earth, when it is neceſſary to penetrate into its bowels for the meaneſt ores.—But if there are difficulties to be removed, there is aſſiſtance at hand, to facilitate the removal of them. There are likewiſe the examples of others, who have gone before you, to animate your purſuit, " who have trodden the ſame ground on which you daily walk, who have filled the ſame places which you at preſent occupy;" many of whom were it neceſſary, it would be eaſy to enumerate.—There is *one* example indeed, which on this occaſion it would be unpardonable to omit; I mean that of our illuſtrious Founder:* of whoſe extenſive learning and critical penetration, his Annotations on the New Teſtament, are a ſplendid, and will be a laſting monument.———But after all, the example which you are bound particularly

* Sir Norton Knatchbull, Knight and Baronet.

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to follow, and to keep conſtantly and ſtedfaſtly in view, is the example of the Saviour and Redeemer of the World; in compariſon of which, the others "have no glory by reaſon of the glory that excelleth." 2 *Cor.* iii. 10.——If then, you are ambitious to imitate that Divine Pattern of all Excellence, by "growing in wiſdom as you grow in ſtature;" Be ſtill more careful to reſemble Him, by "increaſing in favour both with God and man." *Luke* ii. 52. This you will find to be your beſt and moſt laſting intereſt; for "whether there be tongues, they ſhall ceaſe; whether there be knowledge, it ſhall vaniſh away:" 1 *Cor.* xiii. 8. but piety and virtue ſhall for ever flouriſh; they will be your brighteſt ornaments in this world, your trueſt friends and inſeparable companions in that which is to come.

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